



Letter from Taizé

n° 272 Quarterly 0,75 €
2011/3

PROCESSED

JUL 21 2011

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Unlimited Compassion

Opting for joy does not mean running away from life's problems. Instead, it enables us to face reality, and even suffering. Opting for joy is inseparable from a concern for other human beings. It fills us with unlimited compassion.

(Brother Alois, *Letter from Chile*)

Marlon (Zambia)

Only when I lost my parents did I come to understand the real definition of being poor. Homeless, with an empty stomach for some weeks or more, no clothes and without friends, because even the neighbors don't like people who are poor. I had to pretend that I didn't exist, spending many hours alone.

In that painful experience, God changed me by giving me a new heart, always wanting and dreaming to help the poor, especially orphans, because I've been there. After those painful days I had, God has blessed my life. He has given me a wonderful and amazing father (I was adopted when I was 16) who loves me the way I am. The more you give the more you receive. God loves a cheerful giver.

Being witnesses to communion requires the courage to swim against the stream. The Holy Spirit will give us the imagination we need to find ways of remaining close to those who

suffer, to listen to them and to be affected by situations of distress.

Hesta (South Africa)

I think that what differentiates human beings from the rest of God's creation is that we were not only made purely to exist and to survive, but rather to live in unity with others. Each of us is suffering, for while still on earth, afflictions will always be part of our lives. This pain could be because we are wounded by the harshness of life, or from our own inward struggles.

Our job as Christians is to help relieve others of that pain—that's why we need a community. Yes, true joy, which can only come from God, can be present within us by living in a conscious union of love with others, for happiness is only real when it is shared.

If our communities, our parishes and youth groups could become more and more places of heartfelt kindness and trust—places where we welcome each other, where we seek to understand and support others, places where we are attentive to the weakest, to those who are not in our usual circle, to those who are poorer than we are.

Ignacio (Argentina)

At Rio la Barquita, on the border between

Argentina and Uruguay, there is a little community of fishermen and working families who receive their daily bread by cutting bulrushes and certain species of trees. Life is really difficult in this village: among many other problems, bad weather can spoil ten days of cutting bulrushes.

During the summer, a priest and some youth live side by side with these people, without offering economic and social solutions, but intending to share God's love. And to show that even in the hardest situations, God is close to them and has not forgotten them. For my first mission, I was 15, and it really changed my way of living and viewing life.

When you visit these people's homes, when they open their hearts and it really becomes a dialogue from heart to heart, or when you play with the kids of the island, sometimes you can see the face of Jesus saying, "Everything you did for the least of my brothers, you did it for me."

One sign of our times is the great generosity with which so many people have come to the assistance of the victims of tragic natural disasters. How can this generosity motivate our societies, even in everyday life?

Kimiko, Jeffrey, Jun et Isao (Japan)

After the earthquake in March, four young people from Japan sent emails to Taizé, which Jens from Germany transcribed. In the messages

Openhanded to Your Fellows

If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

In the life of ancient Israel, the relationship with God was lived out in relationships of solidarity among the members of the nation. The above passage from the Book of Deuteronomy illustrates well this link: people must be ready to "be openhanded and freely lend" to the poor, as to their own brothers or sisters.

The Law of Moses states that every seventh year, the fields must not be cultivated (Leviticus 25:4; see Exodus 23:10-11). This was for religious reasons, it was a "Sabbath of the ground," to remind Israel that the true owner of the land was the Lord himself.

But this command, although religious in nature, also had an important social consequence. For the seventh year was also "the year for canceling debts" (Deuteronomy 15:1). As it approached, therefore, lenders tended to be reticent before the risk of a "resetting" that would penalize them. That is what the author calls a "wicked thought" (v. 9a). This thought could even become a true sin (v. 9b), because "whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Proverbs 14:31). Giving generously, on the other hand, would lead to God's blessing (v. 10).

The last verse of our passage: "There will always be poor people in the land" (v. 11a) reminds us of the words of Jesus (see John 12:8). This somewhat pessimistic statement of the persistence of poverty leads to the energetic reminder of the commandment at the heart of the passage: "You will be openhanded towards your fellow citizens who are poor and needy in your land" (v. 11b). Seeing our fellows in need and opening our hands to them (see 1 John 3:17) in fact reflects God's love towards humankind.

- Given the environment in which I live, what concrete response can I make to the call to "give joyfully" (2 Corinthians 9:7)?
- How can aiding my poor brother or sister be a source of fulfillment for me?

To Judge (*shaphat*)

If there is a biblical word which has evolved over centuries, leading to frequent misunderstandings, it is certainly the verb "to judge" and its cognates. Consider one of the oldest books in the Bible, *Shophetim* (Judges), which presents a woman, Deborah, who "was judging Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah...and the Israelites went up to her for a judgment (*mishpat*)" (Judges 4:4-5). As the NIV translates, "they went "to have their disputes decided." Since every human society differences of opinion arise between groups or individuals, a society needs to find ways to resolve them without violence and in a manner acceptable to all. In ancient Israel, the disputing parties appeared before a respected person—her prophet, elsewhere the elders—to set out the dispute in public. After having examined the situation, the judge rendered his or her verdict, a "judgment."

The basic role of the judges was thus to restore social harmony damaged by violent acts. The biblical word for that harmony or good order is *tselem*, usually translated into English as "righteousness" or "justice." This did not mean, however, giving each person what he or she deserved, nor of deciding whether they had broken a written law, nor, save less, of punishing a guilty party, but of fostering peace and well-being (*shalom*) of society by putting things back into their right place. To do this, the judge needed a special gift that can be called wisdom, the ability to see beneath the surface of events to discern the hidden good and evil. In the Biblical King Solomon is the archetype of that wisdom proper to a judge, as we see especially in the famous story of the two women who come to him for a judgment (see 1 Kings 3:16-28). The narrative ends with these words: "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice" (v. 28).

Since the maintenance of harmony and justice is a society's greatest good, it is not surprising that

NOVEMBER

DAILY READINGS

13^{Mt 25:14-30} **SUN** Paul writes: We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that in the same way God will gather to himself those who have fallen asleep in him.

Mon You are my lamp, Lord you light up my darkness. With you I storm the rampart, with my God I can scale any wall.

Tue The Lord says: While my people was still young, I loved them. I guided them with ties of human kindness and love.

Wed There is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself a human being, who gave himself for all.

Thu Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it to the ends of the earth: the Lord has redeemed his servant.

Fri The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

Sat Peter writes: Put all your hope in the grace brought to you by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Sun You have been buried with Christ in baptism, and you have also been raised with him, because you have believed in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

These short readings are those read day by day, at community prayer in Taizé. The Bible reference given indicates a slightly longer passage.

20^{Mt 25:31-40} **SUN** Jesus said: In truth I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

21^{Is 26:19} **Mon** Isaiah said: You who dwell in the dust, wake up and sing for joy: your dead will live.

22^{Dt 32:1-4} **Tue** Moses said: God is our rock, his works are perfect. All his ways are just.

23^{2Co 5:1-7} **Wed** Paul writes: We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven.

24^{Mk 4:1-9, 13-20} **Thu** Jesus said in a parable: Some, like seeds sown in good soil, listen to the Word of God, accept it, and bear much fruit.

25^{Ps 56} **Fri** You have delivered my soul from death, Lord, so that I may walk in the presence of God in the light of life.

26^{Ep 3:1-12} **Sat** Paul writes: I have become a servant of the Gospel by the gift of God's grace, which is for me to proclaim to the nations the unfathomable riches of Christ.

27^{Mk 13:33-37} **SUN ADVENT** Jesus said: What I am saying to you I say to all: Stay awake!

forgive, again and again. And being faithful to your Gospel can kindle in us this passion for forgiveness.

28^{Is 40:1-5} **Mon** Isaiah said: Prepare a way through the desert for the Lord. Make a straight road for our God.

29^{Dn 7:9-14} **Tue** Daniel said: In a vision I saw one like a son of man and the people of every tongue and nation worshipped him. His kingdom is everlasting, it will never pass away.

30^{Mt 4:18-22} **Wed** St ANDREW Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." And at once they left their nets and followed him.

DECEMBER

DAILY READINGS

God of compassion, what you want for us is life to the full. Enable us to listen to your Word and to put it into practice. It is light that transfigures our humanity.

25 In 1:9-12

SUN In 1:26-38

1 In 1:19-28

SUN

4 Mk 1:1-8

SUN

John the Baptist

said: "I am the voice of one calling in the desert: Make straight the way of the Lord!"

5 2 Co 1:18-22

Mon

Paul writes: Christ Jesus was never Yes-and-No; his nature is all Yes.

6 1 Co 2:1-9

Tue

Paul writes: I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you God's mystery, for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

7 Hos 14:2-9

Wed

The Lord says: I will cure my people of their disloyalty, I shall love them with all my heart.

8 Ep 1:12-14

Thu

God chose us in Christ, before the world was made, to be holy and faultless before him in love.

9 Ph 3:17-4:1

Fri

St. Paul writes: Train yourself to live in godliness; it holds out promise both for the present life and the life to come.

10 1 Co 12:3-13

Sat

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Spirit; there are different ways of serving, but it is the same Lord;

and the poor who have no one to help.

11 1 Thm 5:7-11

Fri

James writes: For an example of patience in the face of suffering look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord; those who persevered are blessed.

12 Col 3:12-21

Sat

May the word of Christ dwell in you in all its fullness.

13 Rm 12:9-13

Sat

Let your love be sincere, cling to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection.

14 Is 49:13-26

Sat

Shout for joy, you heavens; earth exult! For the Lord is consoling his people and having compassion on his afflicted ones.

15 Lk 13:4-21

Fri

Jesus said: The kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it all rose.

16 Ph 3:17-19

Fri

Paul writes: Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transfigure our lowly bodies into the likeness of his glorious body.

17 Rm 12:9-13

Sat

Let your love be sincere, cling to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection.

18 In 1:26-38

SUN

Mary said to the angel: I am the Lord's servant, let it happen to me as you have said.

19 Ps 73

Mon

You hold me by my hand, Lord, and guide me with your counsel. If I am with you, I desire nothing upon the earth.

20 1 Co 1:4-9

Tue

You are eagerly waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will continue to give you strength to the very end.

21 Rm 8:22-27

Wed

Paul writes: We look towards our salvation in hope. Now, to hope for what we see is not hope at all. To hope for what we do not see means to await it with constancy.

22 Is 25:6-9

Thu

From the prophet Isaiah: Look, this is our God; we put our hope in him and he saved us. Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

23 Heb 10:1-18

Fri

The Lord says: I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds. Their sins and wrongdoings I will remember no more.

24 Is 49:13-26

Sat

Shout for joy, you heavens; earth exult! For the Lord is consoling his people and having compassion on his afflicted ones.

25 In 1:9-12

SUN

CHRISTMAS

The Word was the true light that gives light to everyone. To all those who accepted him he gave the right to become children of God.

26 Mt 10:17-22

Mon

St STEPHEN

Jesus said: When you are handed over, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. What you are to say will be given to you when the time comes, for it is not you who will be speaking but the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.

27 In 1:1-7

Tue

St JOHN

God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, we are in communion with one another.

28 1 Pe 5:6-11

Wed

Peter writes: Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.

29 In 3:14-20

Thu

Christ Jesus gave his life for us, and we too should give our lives for one another.

30 Lk 13:34-21

Fri

Jesus said: The kingdom of God is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it all rose.

31 Mt 5:13-16

Sat

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine in people's sight, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Hebrew verb “to judge” also means “to govern.” During the monarchy in Israel, it was thus the king who was the principal judge. Then, the growing complexity of public life favored the appearance of a class of affluent and powerful people who tended to exploit the poor and the weak. For this reason, the king’s role as judge was above all to take care of the needy. He did not take their side because they were poorer than the rich, but simply because they had no one else to defend them.

Seen from the viewpoint of the oppressed and defenseless, the verb “to judge” was thus surprisingly a synonym of “to save, rescue”: “Judge me, God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people” (Psalm 11:1). It was a matter of restoring justice to the innocent incapable of defending themselves. The portrait of the ideal king emphasizes this role of defending the helpless: “With righteousness he will judge the world; with justice he will give decisions for the earth of the earth” (Isaiah 11:4). “May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.... May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy” (Psalm 72:2,4). The ultimate judge, however, is God, who sees and understands everything and who is incorruptible. “Be faithful long for the day when he will come to judge the world with justice” (Psalm 67:4; 96:13; 99:9). At that time people did not fear God’s judgment; they were eagerly awaiting it.

As time passed, this positive vision of judgment began to shift, in part because of a greater awareness of the omnipresence of evil. Thus a believer can say: “Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you” (Psalm 143:2). This individual no longer counts upon God’s judgment, but rather on the divine forgiveness (see Psalm 130:3-4). And when the Bible was translated into Greek, the word for judging, *krinō*, emphasized mainly the act of discriminating between good and evil. The positive meaning, putting someone back into his or her rightful place, was covered by another verb, *dikaioō*, “to vindicate or justify,” used especially by Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans (1:17; 3:24-26; 5:1; 8:33). Although faith in a God who comes to save his own remains, it is no longer expressed by the verb “to judge,” which takes on connotations which are at first neutral—separating the sheep and the goats (see Matthew 25:32-33)—and then increasingly negative. This evolution unfortunately obscures the authentic meaning of a biblical word, which expressed first and foremost God’s concern for justice and peace in the world as well as his tenderness to people whose rights were violated.

Is God Demanding?

Many of us wonder about God and what he may be asking of us. The question, however, can take a twist when we are reading a difficult passage in the Bible or as we realize how challenging it can be to live out our faith. We find ourselves asking, “Is God demanding? Is God perhaps even too demanding?”

A first reply may lie in considering how we grow as human beings. When we care for another person, our attitude is usually one of unconditional acceptance but also, and often just as strongly, one of hope and expectancy. If we care deeply about the person, we wish them to mature and to find their way in life. This means offering them encouragement and, sometimes too, wanting them to realize that they are capable of more. In such circumstances, what may come across as a demanding attitude can in fact be an expression of genuine affection. If we are like this when the life and fulfillment of our loved ones are at stake, might not God be like this with us in some way too? Indeed, the God of the Bible both loves human beings unconditionally and expects much of them.

A second reply may be found in looking at what happens when we believe in God. In the Gospels we see an immediate bond appear between Jesus and countless people. Many put their faith in him spontaneously and sought closer contact with him. They confided their sufferings to him and listened to him intently. Some even set out with him as he went from place to place. The Gospels, however, do not stop there. We are told too that many of these very same people, as time went on, found certain things about Jesus hard to grasp, to the point of abandoning him. Believing in Jesus was then both simple and difficult. Simple because his very presence inspired a profound trust. But difficult too because this same trust inevitably led people to new ground, where certain words and actions of Jesus could suddenly seem incomprehensible, even disorienting. Faith in God leads us to move beyond our familiar surroundings, to go to places we would not go to on our own. It reassures us deeply, like nothing else, but also engages us in a struggle. For God is continually inviting us to welcome a life wider than our own horizons. Should we be surprised then if at times we balk or recoil, or else wonder whether it is not all a bit too hard? By faith, by trust in God we learn to receive and to give freely, in short, to take the risk of being loved and of loving. God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is all giving and receiving, a fount of overflowing life where all is shared and nothing is held back. This is the kind of life God wishes to share with us through faith: his own life.

received in the last months from our friends in Japan, it becomes evident that solidarity and mutual trust, but also the simple expression of compassion in words and prayers, help the victims much more than we are sometimes aware of.

"We have been so encouraged by the messages from outside of Japan", says Kimiko, a girl who volunteered in the heavily stricken area of Sendai. "Please continue to pray for people in the area." Jeffrey, who lives in Sendai, gives us a small image of how he sees the support from outside: "Many people came to Sendai to help. I am aware of the network of people who stand with us and pray for us." Also Jun, who had spent times in Taizé as a volunteer, bears witness to the solace and relief victims can experience by the support of people who share in their distress: "I thank you so much for your thoughts and prayers. How strong we can feel, knowing that we are never alone and never abandoned. So many mails and messages came to me during the last weeks. All of them said they pray and think of Japan and its people."

Following the earthquake, gatherings in the areas of the catastrophe to share and pray together were a source of courage to continue for the Christians there. "Even just a few hours after the earthquake, when all the trains and buses had stopped, we had a prayer meeting at one of the Anglican churches," explains Isao from Tokyo.

Apart from the comfort we can find through prayer, the wish to help each other in practical ways was shown more strongly than ever in the Japanese people. Kimiko explains: "What happened was terrifying, but today I was very touched by people's warm-heartedness. I had a chance to talk to persons whom I knew but had never talked to. A lot of strangers offered their help when we were in trouble. I saw solidarity which had been invisible and which people had thought was lost in our society."

"It is not your possessions that you distribute to the poor; you are simply giving them back what belongs to them. For you have only kept for yourself what is given to all for the use of all. The earth belongs to all and not only to the rich, but it was expropriated by a few to the detriment of all who work it." (Ambrose of Milan, fourth century)

suffering often makes us speechless: it seems to be too painful to open your heart to it, too risky to step out of your comfort zone and even try to think about it. But you always have a choice: to run away, to hide, to pretend that this suffering doesn't exist in your life.

But we can also slow down our busy life, look the others in the eyes, acknowledge our inability and say: "I don't have much love, I'm as poor as you are. You are as important for God as I am. I can't truly share your life—but let me be with you in your trials and give you a hand".

Over-accumulating material possessions kills joy. It keeps us trapped in envy. Happiness lies elsewhere: by choosing a simple lifestyle, working not just for profit but to give meaning to life, sharing with others, everyone can help create a future of peace.

Daniel (Slovakia)

To show that we love Christ does not just mean to go the other end of the world to point out how much we can do for others. The daily expression of God's love is for me connected with mercy. When love for God is an expression of my faith, then mercy is my belief in practice. In the beginning of the twentieth century this message of God's merciful love became stronger

through the mission and life of Saint Faustina Kowalska, who spent her short but very rich and mystical life in deep connection with Jesus. In her diary can be found so many examples of this selfless love which can be put into practice.

When I see my limits, I understand I cannot do so much—but in trust, which comes out of my faith, I can live in dependency on God. And what at first seems to be fragility can turn into something which is beyond me—mercy in small, almost invisible things.

Other articles are available at www.taize.fr/letter

BROTHER AMI (1916 - 2011)

On May 3, Brother Ami died in his 95th year. Born in 1916 in the Swiss Jura, he was trained as a schoolteacher. He met Brother Roger and the first brothers in the early 1940s. He was part of a group of young people in Switzerland who made up what was called the "great community," surrounding the small community in the making. He became a brother himself in 1951. After a few years in Taizé, he went to join the brothers in Algiers, where one of the first fraternities of our community was located. Later he returned to Taizé and spent the rest of his life there. While undertaking manual labor, he was fascinated by history. He was an expert in the history of Burgundy and of its Romanesque churches. He was always careful to keep up friendships and was faithful to the bonds created.

Tatyana (Russia)

When you face suffering, when you see a child with a serious disease or meet a homeless person who doesn't have anything, it is discouraging. Encountering

Letter from Taizé

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e-mail: letter@taize.fr www.taize.fr
News from Taizé by email twice a month free of charge:
www.taize-news.php

Directeur de publication : A. Trochard. Édition : Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France. CPPAP n° 0115K 79608 - Impression : Comimpress, 01750 Replonges, France — DL 1128